XXVI FIMS World Congress of Sports Medicine
May 30-June 3 1998, Orlando, Florida, USA

Women and Sport: Social Issues – Ensuring a Safe Environment for the Female Athlete

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Acknowledgement: Grateful thanks to Mars Inc. for travel funding assistance.

Note: The contents of this presentation are drawn from material used in a forthcoming chapter of the IOC Women's Sport Encyclopedia: Medical Issues to be published by Blackwells Scientific.

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Introduction

Women athletes will only optimise their potential in sport if they are able to train and compete in conditions of complete safety. However, many females in sport endure less than safe conditions. They suffer pain, illness or injury, not as a result of the normal stresses and strains of practice and competition but as a consequence of the violation by others of inter-personal boundaries – in other words through experiencing sexually harassing or abusive behaviour.

Particularly dangerous in this regard are relationships between the athlete and her (usually male) coach or other authority figures (Kirby and Geaves 1996), as well as those between the athlete and her peers (Kane and Disch 1993; Pike Masteralexis 1995). The violation of personal safety within such relationships has serious outcomes for mental health but cannot be seen only as a 'medical' problem for it clearly relates to the social and political environment within sport as a whole.

Types of abuse

Interpersonal abuses may take four main forms: sexual, physical, emotional or those arising from neglect (Crouch 1995). Clearly, combinations of these abuses frequently occur, for example, where an athlete suffers emotional blackmail or physical damage as well as sexual exploitation.

Legal and constitutional changes towards sex equity in wider society have been secured by the women's movement in many western industrial nations in the 1970s (such as Title IX in the USA in 1972, the Sex Discrimination Act in Britain in 1975 and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Constitution Act 1982 in Canada): but despite such legal changes, it is apparent that discriminatory behaviour is a persistent, deep-seated and resilient male habit *within* the world of sport which will take some considerable time to change.

Research mapping the extent of institutional discrimination has *preceded* that on personal sexism and abuse (White and Brackenridge 1985; Acosta and Carpenter 1985, 1990) but provided an important platform of statistical evidence about vertical and horizontal sex segregation on which later, inter-personal studies subsequently developed.

Research studies about inter-personal harassment and sexual abuse in sport only began in the late 1980s (Crosset 1986, 1989; Brackenridge 1987, 1991, 1994, 1996, 1997b; Lackey 1990; Lenskyj 1992b). Specific knowledge about the extent and types of violations of personal and sexual safety in sport is comparatively limited since systematic research into the issue began so late and because researchers frequently find their access to data blocked by concerned gatekeepers.

The original stimulus for research into this topic came not from medicine, albeit that clinical symptoms of harassment and abuse were evident amongst some female athletes, but as an extension of research into discriminatory practices and equal opportunities (Lenksyj 1986; Theberge 1987; Hall 1988). It was then only a short step to the study of sexual harassment (see Figure 1).

Definitions of sexual harassment and abuse

There is no universally accepted set of definitions of sexual harassment or sexual abuse. Even though these practices may be defined *objectively* they are experienced *subjectively* so the personal and psychological impact of the same behaviour may be vastly different depending on the individual female athlete's background and perceptions. But if we take the view that what constitutes abuse is *only* that which is in the eye/experience of the beholder then we are also in danger of permitting exploitative behaviour to continue to undermine the sport experience for unknown numbers of women.

[Fig. 1 about here. The sexual exploitation continuum]

One conceptualisation of sexual harassment and abuse places them as the middle and extreme points on a continuum of sexual exploitation with examples listed against each. Whilst it is important to stress that individual athletes may experience these safety violations in an undifferentiated way, the model does offer a means of approaching *preventative* work with authority figures and policy groups in sport: it may also facilitate treatments and *curative* work.

The grooming process, long recognised within clinical literature, is at the heart of the abusive relationship. It marks the distinction between sexual harassment, defined as unwanted behaviour or approaches on the basis of sex, and sexual abuse. In grooming, the coach gradually builds the trust of the athlete because he offers not only tangible, extrinsic rewards for good performance, such as team selection, the chance to win competitions, representative honours and medals, but also because he nurtures and protects the athlete in a parent-like relationship, providing a mixture of discipline and affection upon which the athlete gradually becomes reliant. Grooming is a conscious

process on the part of the abuser. The athlete, on the other hand, is an unwitting party to the gradual erosion of boundaries between her and the coach.

The power afforded to the coach in his position of authority offers an effective camouflage for grooming and abuse. Incremental shifts in the boundary between the coach and athlete go unnoticed, unrecognised or unreported by the athlete until the point when she has become entirely trapped and is unable to resist his sexual advances. Disclosure is enormously difficult for the athlete who risks uncertain support from her teammates and sport administrators and may even lose her athletic career by speaking out. Any rejection of grooming by an athlete or challenges to the authority of the perpetrator carry the risk of sanctions such as withdrawal of privileges or expertise or, most seriously, exclusion from the team or squad. Since the *raison d'etre* of the talented young athlete is to succeed in her chosen sport, she feels virtually powerless to challenge the one individual who can help her achieve that success. For this reason, the athlete with potential talent is at higher risk of being targetted for sexual abuse than either the recreational athlete, who can leave the sport or club to find another, or the already successful athlete, who is no longer so dependent upon her coach. For the athlete on the brink of top level success the stakes are highest of all and the pressures to collude with unsafe behaviours felt most keenly.

Susceptibility to abuse

General statistics for non-sport settings indicate that around one in three or four girls experience sexual abuse, however defined, before reaching adulthood (Russell 1984). Most of these cases occur within the familial setting yet extra-familial abuse comprises a small but not insignificant proportion of the total recorded (La Fontaine 1990). These

figures suggest, therefore, that large numbers of girls and young women enter sport clubs and programmes already having experienced the stresses and trauma of sexual abuse in the family. These individuals are likely to be especially vulnerable to approaches by unscrupulous coaches. Research on small populations of female athlete survivors of abuse (Brackenridge 1997b) indicates that a distant relationship with the parents, especially the father, may well be a risk factor for sexual abuse in sport. Whether having experienced sexual abuse in the home increases the susceptibility of the individual to abuse in sport is not known but it seems that this is highly likely.

Women athletes who present with signs of disordered eating (extreme weight loss, amenorrhea, eroded tooth enamel and so on) may also be showing the symptoms of sexual abuse. According to the literature on eating disorders there is an association between anorexia and bulimia and sexual victimisation (Johnson 1994). One proposed explanation for this link is that the athlete is trying to desexualise her body to take back control over the sexual advances of her abuser. Other overt signs of sexual abuse and neglect includes cuts or bruises to the body, vaginal soreness, unusual knowledge of or interest in sexual matters for a particular age, depression and social withdrawal, refusal to eat, or sudden changes in mood or routine behaviour.

Risk Factors for Sexual Abuse in Sport

Risk factors for sexual abuse in sport associated with the coach, the athlete and the sport have been extrapolated from both qualitative (Brackenridge 1997a) and quantitative research (Kirby and Greaves 1996) (see Fig.2). The risks of sexual exploitation in sport are increased for particularly young aro0und of before puberty, for women and girls

suffering physical disabilities or learning difficulties and/or those for whom communication or access to others is difficult.

[Fig.2 about here - Two cycles of sexual abuse in sport]

Perpetrators of sexual abuse in sport appear to demonstrate at least two characteristic cycles of behaviour, one being the paedophile (Wolf 1984) and the other the predator (Brackenridge 1997a) (see Fig 2). These two cycles bear theoretical resemblance to *child molester* and *rapist* types identified in clinical psychology (see for example, Knight and Prentky 1990): however, the predator cycle has yet to be verified on data from a large sample.

Whilst is tempting to focus analysis of risk entirely on perpetrator motivations and behaviours this is also a dangerous strategy. Sexual abusers have proved notoriously difficult to classify and evidence from social work and clinical therapy have repeatedly shown that they cross social and demographic categories (Waterhouse 1993; Russell 1994; Whetsell Mitchell 1995). No clear link with socio-economic status, ethnicity or region has been proven, although it has been suggested that the silence around the incest taboo have been more effectively maintained by those from the wealthier classes (Doyle 1994). A singular focus on perpetrators also distracts from other potentially useful areas of risk analysis and management, notably the *athlete* and the *sport*.

Not surprisingly, known *athlete risk factors* in sport match those recognised in other, non-sport settings. However, the added physical nature of sports performance, coupled with the requirements for extreme dedication and social, physical and emotional sacrifice at a relatively young age, all combine to increase risk. For the athlete who has low self-esteem or a weak relationship with her ‘natural’ parents, especially the father, there

appear to be greater risks. The susceptibility to close attention and interest of another parent substitute - the coach - can lead to close emotional attachment, infatuation and even love. Indeed, many survivors of sexual abuse in sport articulate mixed emotions about their abusers, perhaps even years or decades later, and blame themselves for falling prey to sexual exploitation.

The *sport context* represents another set of potential risks of sexual abuse for the female athlete. Organisations which have no formal policies or procedures for recruiting, checking, inducting or monitoring employees, whether paid or voluntary, are an especially easy target for the paedophile. This is particularly the case in the lower ranks of a sport or at recreational level where volunteer labour is often welcomed with little or no screening. Whether or not rules about dress or technical requirement for physical touch influence the level of risk of sexual exploitation is unclear from research to date, However, sports in which it is possible for individuals to be isolated in or from the main training venue or taken on trips away from home clearly have a responsibility to implement rigorous safety procedures. In addition to procedural action, sport organizations have a responsibility for ensuring a safe athletic and social climate for the female athlete. All too often, sport for women simply echoes the worst excesses of what might be termed male locker room culture (Messner & Sabo 1990. In such a climate, interpersonal boundaries are all-too-easily eroded and personal and sexual liberties taken by sexual predators in positions of authority. The consequences of this for the female athlete are devastating. Many women suffer psychological disorders for years afterwards and most have great difficulty summoning up the courage to report what has happened to them.

The work of *WomenSport International*

Part of the work of the *WomenSport International* Task Force is to build up a sufficient knowledge base around this issue to get sport organisations to take it seriously. We now have a network of international scholars working on the problem and have generated bibliographies and policy resource lists. We are also actively engaged in lobbying and advocacy work and count amongst our recent successes:

- the development of anti-harassment policies in sport in the USA, Canada and Australia
- the design and delivery of awareness raising and policy development training courses for sport organisations and administrators in the UK and Holland
- research projects in Canada, Holland, Norway, each funded collaboratively by national sport agencies (two through their respective National Olympic Committees)
- papers in sociology of sport, sport psychology and sport policy publications.

As researchers we have also faced the down side including:

- threats of legal action against us by major sport organisations
- personal insults and attempted blackmail
- media harassment and misrepresentation
- isolation and ridicule by individuals and agencies with something to hide
- rejection of grant submissions on the grounds that it is 'just sport'
- withdrawal of access to research samples for fear of what might be found.

The greatest impediment to future research into sexual abuse of athletes is access to the community of sport. Very few sport organisations are yet persuaded of the importance of

the issue or of the need to gather more data. Even those who are working towards policies for improving athlete safety are reluctant to open themselves to the gaze of the researcher and to risk the possibility of uncovering 'bad news'. However, only with the systematic collection and analysis of large data sets, both quantitative and qualitative, and comparison with data *outside* the sport context, will the scale and dynamics of this issue become known. The development of a contingency theory of sexual abuse in sport, which combines the perspectives of the athlete, the coach/abuser *and* the sport context, should enable sport organisations to assess risk in a given setting. The most valuable research will be that which identifies the *causes* rather than just the *symptoms* of sexual abuse and which therefore assists us in making sport a safer place for women.

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Figure 1 The sexual exploitation continuum

Source: **Brackenridge, C. H. (1997a)** In G Clarke, & B Humberstone (eds) Researching Women in Sport. London, Macmillan.

SEX DISCRIMINATION	**SEXUAL HARASSMENT**	**SEXUAL ABUSE**
I N S T I T U T I O N A L .....P E R S O N A L		
"the chilly climate"	*"unwanted attention"*	*"groomed or coerced"*
- vertical & horizontal job segregation - lack of harassment policy and/or officer or reporting channels - lack of counselling or mentoring systems - differential pay or rewards or promotion prospects on the basis of sex - poorly/unsafely designed or lit venues - absence of security	- written or verbal abuse or threats - sexually oriented comments - jokes, lewd comments or sexual innuendoes, taunts about body, dress, marital situation or sexuality - ridiculing of performance - sexual or homophobic graffiti - practical jokes based on sex - intimidating sexual remarks, propositions, invitations or familiarity - domination of meetings, play space or equipment - condescending or patronising behaviour undermining self-respect or work performance - physical contact, fondling, pinching or kissing - vandalism on the basis of sex - offensive phone calls or photos - bullying based on sex	- exchange of reward or privilege for sexual favours - rape - anal or vaginal penetration by penis, fingers or objects - forced sexual activity - sexual assault - physical/sexual violence - groping - indecent exposure - incest

Figure 2 **Two cycles of sexual abuse in sport**

Source: **Brackenridge, C. H. (1997a)** In G Clarke, & B Humberstone (eds) Researching Women in Sport. London, Macmillan.